Separation Science and Technology
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713708471

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To cite this Article Farnand, B. A. and Sawatzky, H.(1988) 'Preferential Adsorption and Selective Permeation of Alcohol/Hydrocarbon Mixtures in Reverse Osmosis', Separation Science and Technology, 23: 12, 1667 — 1681
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/01496398808075656
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01496398808075656

SEPARATION SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, 23(12&13), pp. 1667-1681, 1988

PREFERENTIAL ADSORPTION AND SELECTIVE PERMEATION OF ALCOHOL/HYDROCARBON MIXTURES IN REVERSE OSMOSIS

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ABSTRACT

In binary mixtures of alcohols and hydrocarbons there are two types of reverse osmosis performances. These are selective permeation of the alcohol and selective permeation of the hydrocarbon. Liquid chromatography results have been used to predict the selective permeation of reverse osmosis membranes where the membranes may be difficult to fabricate as well as to determine performance limits in terms of separation.These results are of interest for the production of oxygenated fuel blending agents where specifications require the removal of unreacted methanol for further processing and distillation is not viable.

INTRODUCTION

The reduction of the amount of lead permitted in gasoline has created problems for oil refiners. To maintain existing quality specifications, i.e. gasoline octane ratings, refiners add mixtures of benzene, toluene and xylenes (BTX), reformer gasoline, and other blending agents found in refineries. However, there is concern that these in-refinery products will become limited. For this reason, oxygenates are being considered for blending into gasoline because of their

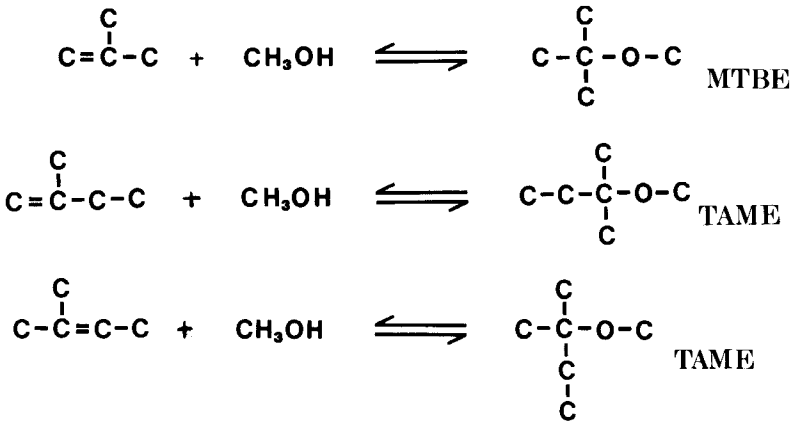

Figure 1 Reactions of Iso-Olefins and Methanol To Produce MTBE and TAME

ability to improve to the octane number, and also because of their adequate supply. Alcohols were among the first to be considered but technical difficulties may preclude their large-scale use. For example, methanol needs an expensive cosolvent and its high vapour pressure requires a reduction of inexpensive high octane number butanes from the final gasoline product. An alternative is to produce of light methyl ethers from refinery olefins and methanol.

The reactions needed to produce methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE)and methyl tertiary amyl ether (TAME) are shown in Fig. 1. The reactions are equilibrium limited (1), and only the iso-olefins will react. The remaining unreacted non iso-olefins should be removed from the reactor product before they are blended into the gasoline pool. Also, the unreacted methanol and the oxygenates must be removed from the remaining olefins to allow their processing in alkylation or other existing refinery operations that use strong acid catalysts (2). It is this removal of methanol that is the object of our study, since distillation cannot be used because of azeotropes. Cost estimates indicate that one-sixth of the cost of MTBE production from refinery olefins is for the removal of methanol from the remaining olefins by existing technology such as solid adsorption and liquid extraction (3,4). The goal of this study is to consider the removal of methanol by

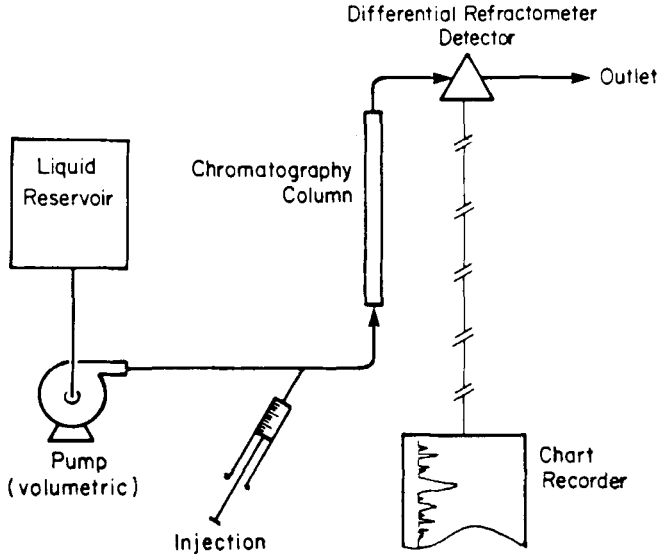

Figure 2 Schematic of Liquid Chromatography Apparatus

reverse osmosis as an alternative to existing technology.

Since the extent of reaction is limited by equilibrium, it is desired to improve the yields by using an excess of methanol. This strategy puts an even greater capacity requirement on the methanol removal process than would be anticipated from stoichiometry. Since the etherification reactor product consists mainly of hydrocarbons, the separation of methanol from methanol and pentane mixtures was studied. This requires the assumption that the pentane behaves in the same manner as the C_4 and C_5 olefins, and that the ethers also behave as hydrocarbons. Results from experiments using simulated etherification reactor product demonstrated the validity of these simplifications (5).

The degree of separation of different compound types by reverse osmosis depends upon the difference of affinity that the membrane exhibits for these components. These differences can be assessed by liquid chromatography experiments which have also been

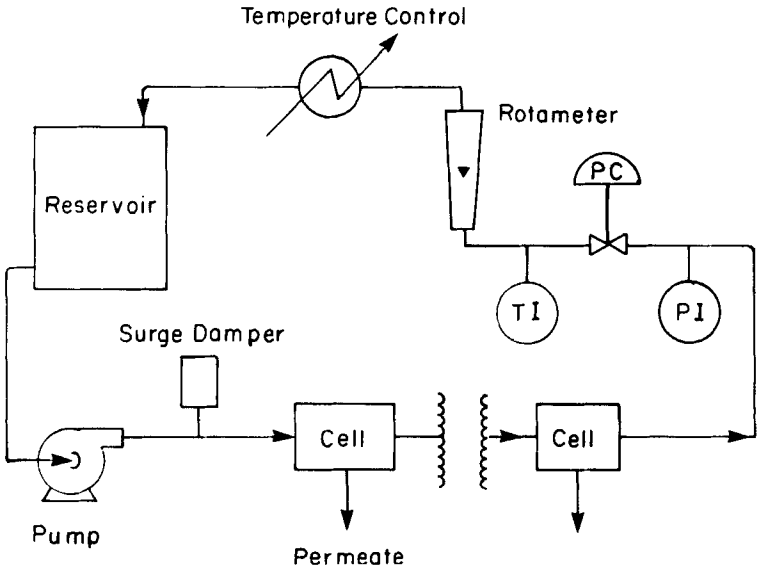

Figure 3 Schematic of Reverse Osmosis Apparatus

PI is the pressure indicator
TI is the temperature indicator
PC is the pressure controller

included in this study (6). The effect of concentration of methanol on membrane performance was also investigated.

EXPERIMENTAL

Liquid chromatography

A schematic of the liquid chromatography apparatus is shown in Fig. 2. The chromatography columns were filled with 38-53 m sieve size candidate membrane polymers. Pure pentane was pumped through the column and both methanol and deuterated pentane were injected separately to determine their retention volumes for each of the polymer materials. Deuterated pentane was chosen because of its different refractive index compared to the natural pentane carrier. It is assumed that the deuterated pentane behaves in the same manner as natural pentane so that its retention volume would simulate that of natural pentane.

Reverse Osmosis

A schematic of the reverse osmosis apparatus is shown in Fig. 3. The reservoir tank was fitted with a condenser to reduce the loss of light components to the atmosphere. NRC (Canada) cells were used to hold the membranes, and have been designed to increase turbulence at the surface of the membrane. They have an effective membrane surface area of 18.5 cm^2 with radial flow across the membrane surface. The membrane permeates were collected through septa capped bottles. Prior to sample collection, these bottles were partly filled with toluene to reduce the vapour pressure of the contents and to both reduce the volume of permeate sample needed and to suppress the formation of bubbles in subsequent analysis by automated capillary gas chromatography. The weight increase of these samples was used to determine the permeation rate.

The temperature was maintained at 23°C and the circulation rate over the membranes was 1 L/min. Thus, even the large separation experiments did not modify the concentration of the feed solution from the first membrane through to the last membrane of the series. The feed solution samples were also collected through a septum into a bottle partly filled with toluene.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Liquid Chromatography

The liquid carrier inside the column is considered to consist of two phases: a mobile phase that flows through the column; and a stationary or adsorbed phase which is in the region of the surface of the particles as well as inside the pores of the packing (Fig. 4). After solutes are injected, their distribution between the mobile phase and the stationary phase determines the retention time. A longer retention time is indicative of a longer residence time in the stationary phase. Solutes that are not preferentially adsorbed do not enter the stationary phase and are eluted very quickly. An important assumption is that the relation of the mobile phase to the stationary phase is the same as the relation of the interfacial region to the bulk solution as found in reverse osmosis. This leads to the use of liquid chromatography to describe the preferential adsorption of solutes in the membrane-solution interfacial region.

The candidate membrane materials investigated for preferential adsorption of pentane and methanol were

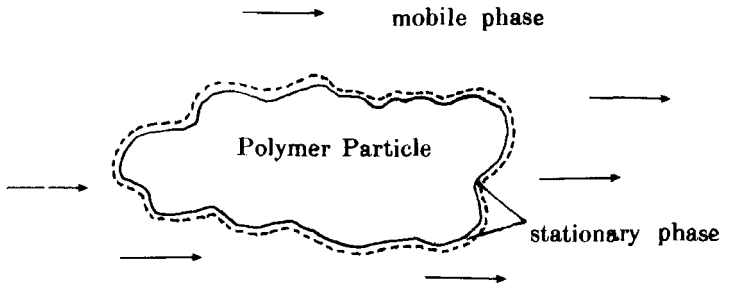

Figure 4 Schematic of Liquid Chromatography Mobile and Stationary Phases

polyethylene (PE) supplied by BDH Chemicals, cellulose acetate (CA), and cellulose acetate butyrate (CAB), both supplied by the Eastman Kodak Company. The average retention volumes for these polymers are shown in Table 1. These retention volumes were then normalized by using bulk densities to determine the voidage in the chromatography column, computing the attendant dead volume in the column and reducing the retention volume, and by comparing the retention volumes on a weight basis. It is further assumed that the specific surface areas of the three columns packed with polymer powder is similar. On the basis of these results, membranes of polyethylene would be expected to preferentially adsorb pentane and to pass a pentane-rich permeate whereas the CA and CAB membranes should preferentially adsorb methanol and pass a methanol-rich permeate. As well, the CAB has the potential to show a greater separation than CA, all other factors considered equal. The assumption that the surface areas of the three polymers tested in the liquid chromatography are similar may be erroneous given the results of Matsuura and Sourirajan (6) for surface areas in aqueous conditions for CA and CAB. Results were unattainable with methanol concentrations of 1% and greater because of the high vapour pressure of methanol-pentane mixtures and the difficult operating conditions.

Reverse Osmosis

Membranes of the above materials were tested in reverse osmosis experiments with various methanol-pentane mixtures along with a commercial membrane. The PE membranes used for these experiments

Table 1 Average Liquid Chromatography Retention Volumes for PE, CA, and CAB

	PE[a]	CA[b]	CAB[c]
Retention, mL			
Methanol	2.81	2.15	3.76
C_5D_{12}	2.91	2.01	2.44
Corrected for Voidage, mL			
Methanol	0.88	0.65	2.25
C_5D_{12}	0.98	0.51	0.93
Normalized, mL/g			
Methanol	2.30	0.53	1.80
C_5D_{12}	2.55	0.41	0.74
Ratio	0.90	1.29	2.43

[a] 0.382 g of 38-53 μm sieve size powder in a 0.195 cm ID x 78.7 cm column.

[b] 1.219 g of 38-53 μm sieve size powder in a 0.195 cm ID x 81.3 cm column

[c] 1.250 g of 38-53 μm sieve size powder in a 0.195 cm ID x 82.6 cm column.

were pieces of commercially available domestic food wrappers, namely, Handiwrap (Dow Chemical) and Glad Wrap (Union Carbide). They possibly contain plasticizers, typically polyvinyl acetate. The CA and CAB membranes were cast in the laboratory by established methods (7,8). Two Filmtec SW-30 thin film composite membranes that were developed for the reverse

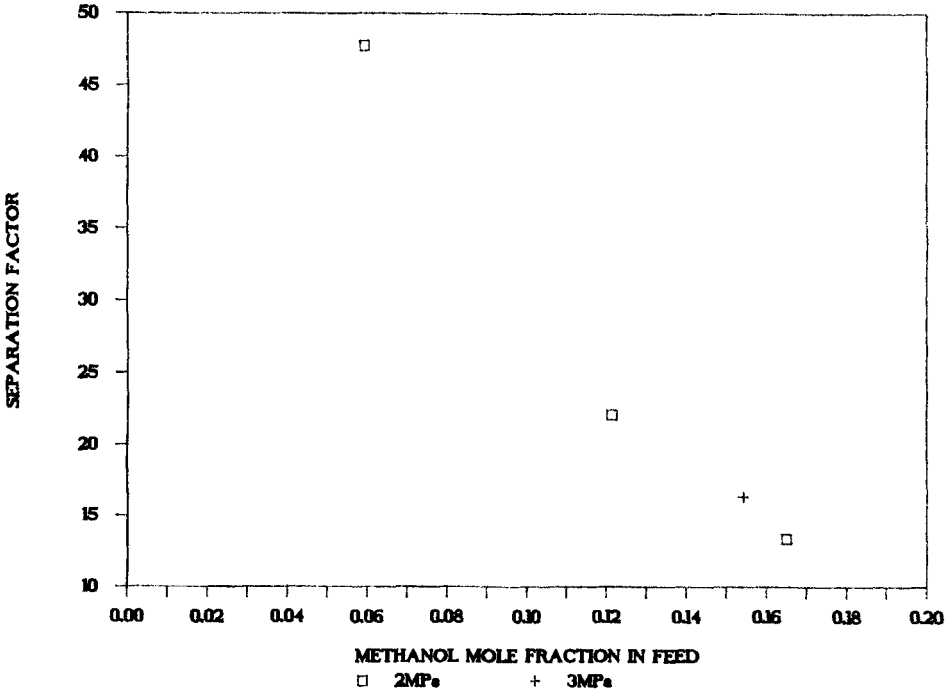

Figure 5 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for CA Membrane

osmosis treatment of sea water were also tested. They have surface layers of aromatic polyamides that are in the same range of polarity as cellulose acetate (9). These membranes were placed in random order in the apparatus.

The results of the reverse osmosis separations are expressed in terms of methanol separation factor, α, defined as

$$\alpha = \frac{(x/(1-x))}{(y/(1-y))} \qquad (1)$$

where x and y are the mole fractions of methanol in the permeate and feed samples. Where α is greater than 1,

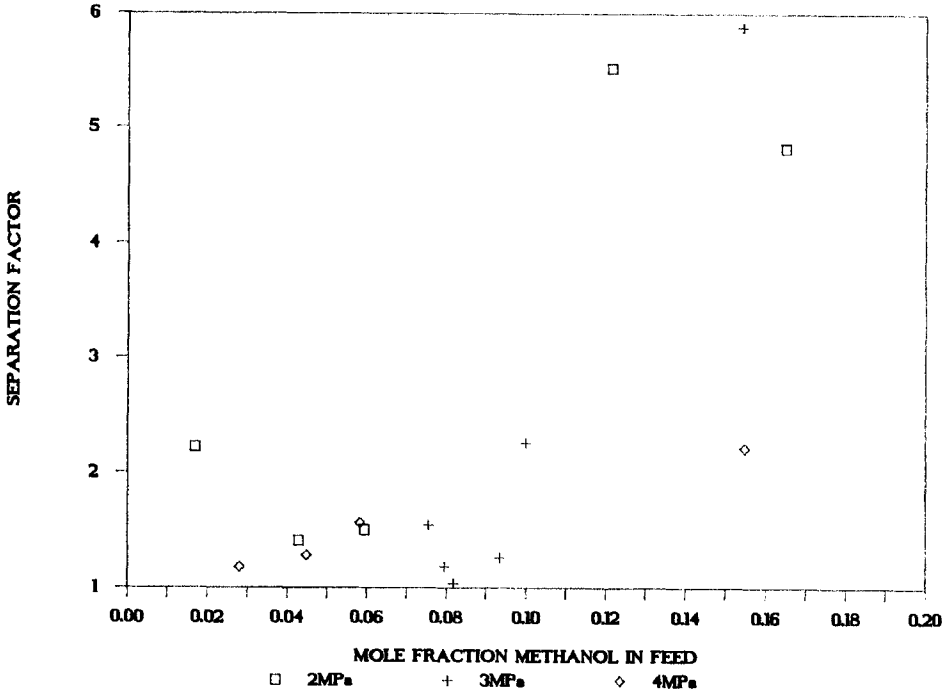

Figure 6 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for SW30-1 Membrane

there is selective permeation of the methanol from the membrane permeate. Where α is less than 1, there is selective rejection of the methanol. Separation factors have been plotted with concentration of methanol in the feed solution for all of the membranes in Fig. 5 to 10. The experiments used to determine the results reported here were of short term duration, and no evidence of permeate flux decline was observed. The same membranes were used throughout the experiments without evidence of polymer degradation.

Contrary to what was expected from the liquid chromatography results, the CA membrane had the greatest separation factors -almost 50 for low concentrations and about 15 for high concentrations. The separation factors for the CAB and the SW-30

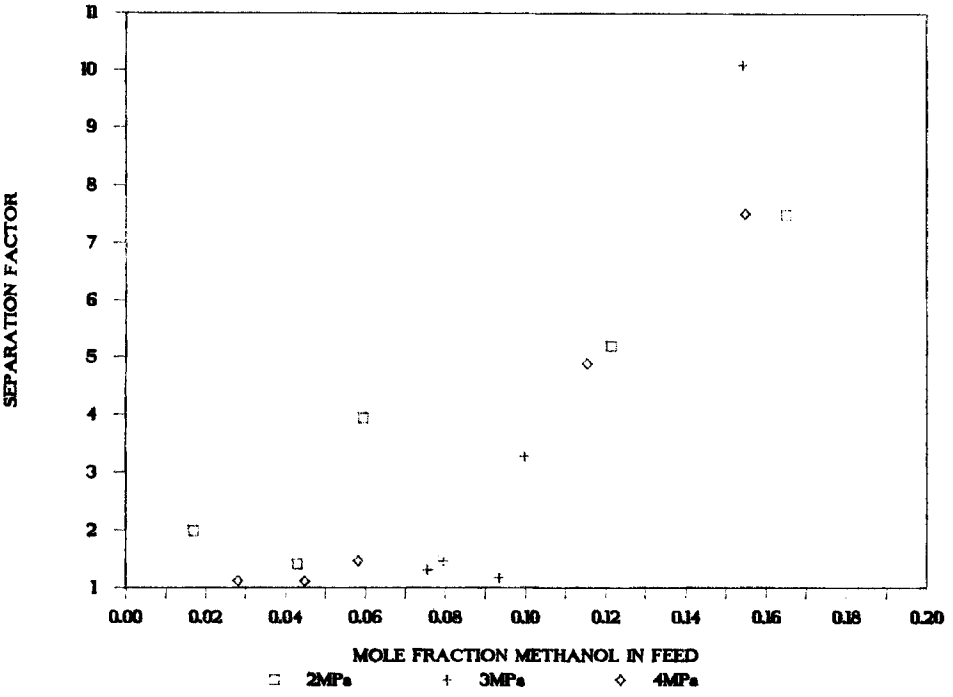

Figure 7 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for SW30-2 Membrane

membranes were considerably lower than those for CA. Also, the SW-30 membranes' separation factor decreased towards unity as the methanol concentration was reduced. The separation factors for the PE membranes were less than unity which indicates a selective permeation of pentane. Similar to the SW-30 membranes, their separation factors approached unity as the methanol concentration was reduced.

A simulated etherification reactor effluent containing methanol, pentane and TAME was tested with CA, CAB, and PE membranes as shown in Table 2. The pentane was assumed to behave similarly to the unreacted iso-pentanes. At lower methanol concentrations, the CA membranes showed the greatest

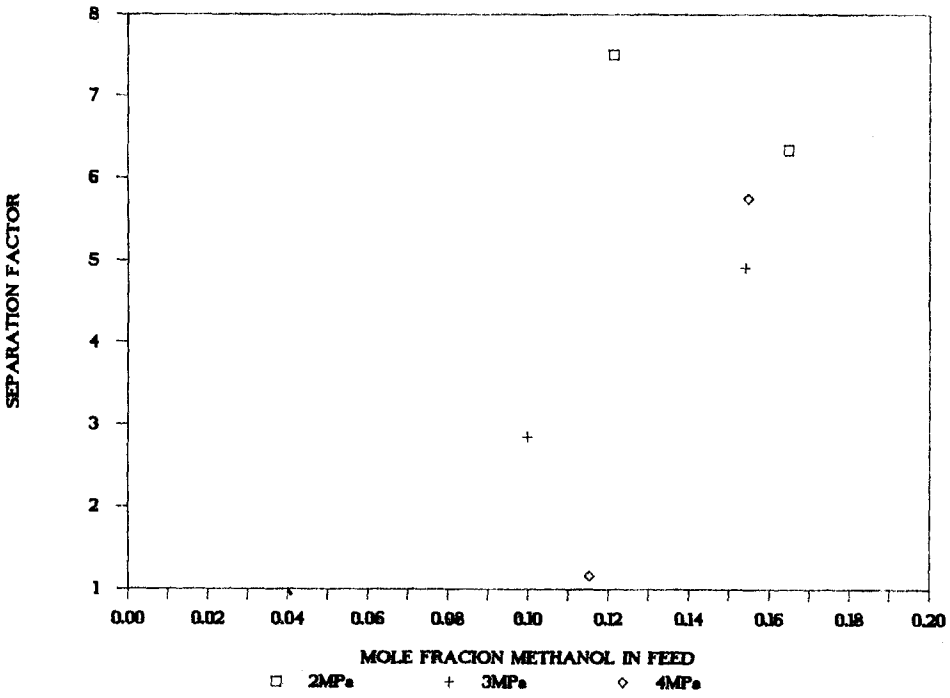

Figure 8 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for CAB Membrane

separation factors, but this decreased with increasing methanol concentration. The pentane was rejected whereas the average separation factor for TAME is approximately unity. As expected, the permeation rate decreases as the separation factor increases. The CAB membrane showed considerably lower separation factors for both methanol and pentane and selectively permeated TAME. The Glad Wrap PE membrane selectively permeated pentane and rejected methanol with a separation factor for TAME in the region of unity. The Handiwrap PE membrane had performed similarly but with separation factors closer to unity.

To compare of these results requires an assumption concerning the relative pore sizes of these membranes.

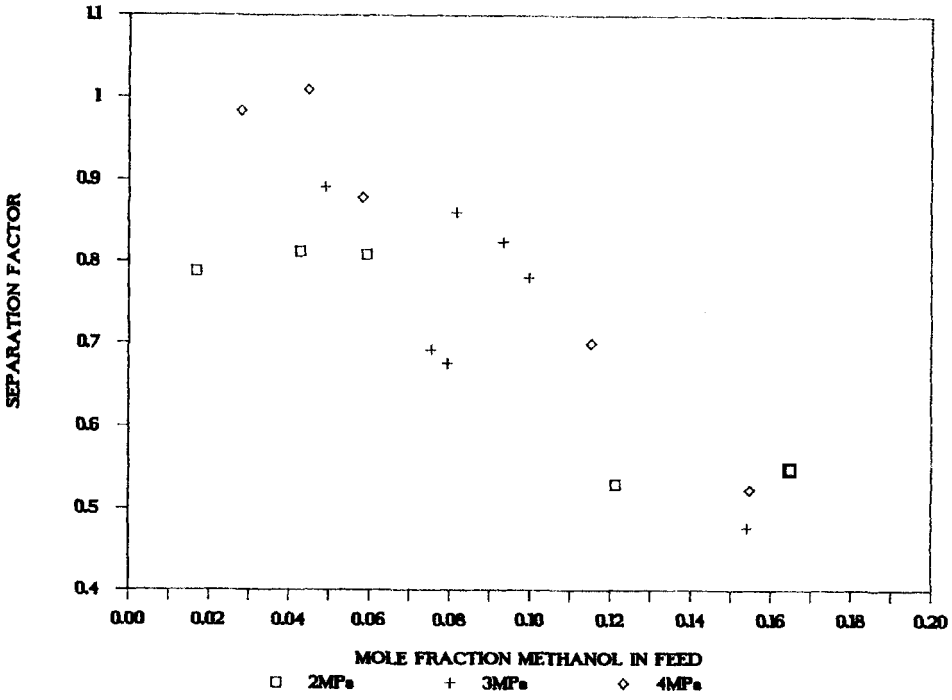

Figure 9 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for GladWrap (PE) Membrane

The CA, CAB, and SW-30 membranes would give salt separations in excess of 95% from aqueous solutions. However, there is no evidence that the pore sizes of the membranes would not be modified by the presence of nonaqueous solutions. The PE membranes do not have any permeate in aqueous reverse osmosis. This may not necessarily be an indication of the absence of porosity, since capillary pressure to force water through a pore in the PE membranes would be quite large. Further, the presence of a nonaqueous solution may cause the PE membranes to have different porosity than in the aqueous experiments. This makes it difficult to determine which membrane has the greatest

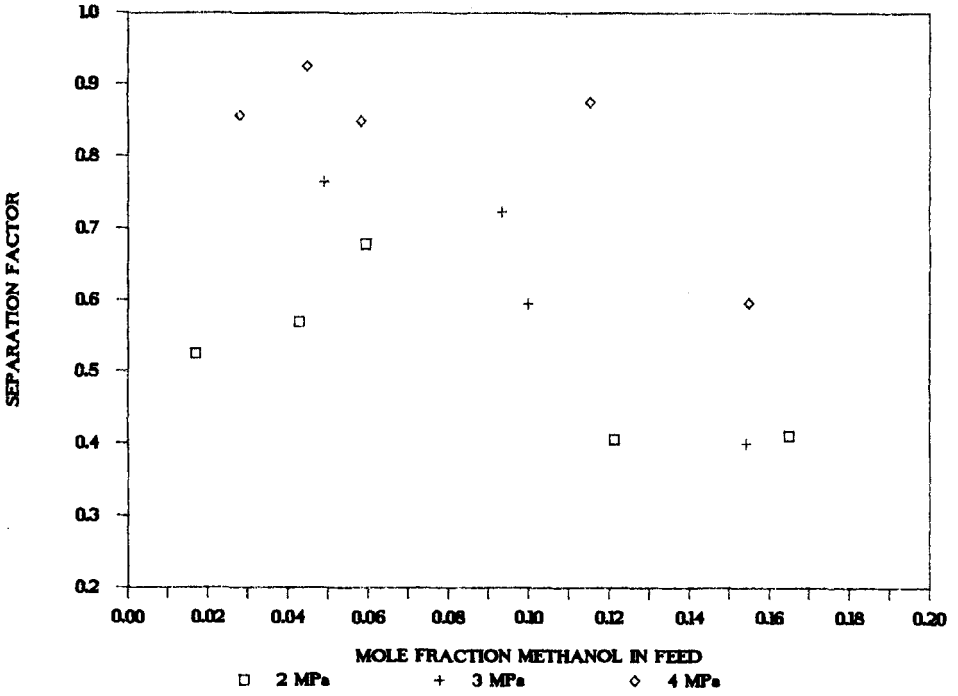

Figure 10 Reverse Osmosis Separation Factors for Handiwrap (PE) Membrane

potential for separation since the relative pore sizes are unknown. Thus a comparison of the membrane experiment results reported in this work is not indicative of the separation potential of the membranes but the results regarding the relative selective permeation and rejection of components by a given membrane are valid. Similar limitations must also be applied to the liquid chromatography results. The absence of information regarding the effective surface area of the polymer in pentane, and only an estimate of the dead volume for the apparatus with the columns attached limits the direct comparison of the polymers. However, the observation of the relative retention volume for pentane compared to methanol for a given membrane material is valid.

Table 2 Reverse Osmosis Results for Synthetic Etherification Reactor Effluent[a]

Memb	Feed Concn, wt%			Perm[b] Rate	Separation Factor		
	MeOH	n-C5	TAME		MeOH	n-C5	TAME
Glad	4.38	94.72	0.08	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
CA-1				0.82	8.166	0.130	1.244
CA-2				0.72	10.37	0.103	1.127
CAB				5.23	2.201	0.471	1.612
CA-3				0.61	15.27	0.070	0.931
Handi				1.17	0.752	1.296	1.873
Glad	10.54	83.41	5.46	0.96	0.478	1.782	1.122
CA-1				1.117	3.892	0.298	0.883
CA-2				1.170	3.713	0.298	0.760
CAB				6.072	1.506	0.723	0.680
CA-3				0.878	4.953	0.220	0.850
Handi				0.798	0.582	1.667	0.760
Glad	9.57	84.56	5.21	1.117	0.520	1.712	0.997
CA-1				0.971	5.697	0.193	0.857
CA-2				1.144	4.180	0.262	0.941
CAB				6.782	1.222	0.808	1.217
CA-3				0.997	5.868	0.183	1.038
Handi				n/a	0.704	1.233	1.437

[a] operating pressure of 2 MPa, operating temperature of 25°C.

[b] permeation rate in kg/h/m^2.

For the process of removing methanol from etherification reactor effluent, the membrane with the highest separation factor, CA, is the obvious candidate. The removal as permeate of the minor component, methanol, is desirable in that less surface area would be required for a separation process. The separation factors reported in this work are inadequate for the etherification process, since they would still require a large amount of surface area to treat a commercial process. Future work shall consider the modification of the membrane surface to improve the selective permeation of methanol.

CONCLUSIONS

Polar membranes can selectively permeate methanol from mixtures of unreacted olefins and the ether

product formed during the production of MTBE and TAME. Non polar membranes selectively permeate the hydrocarbons from the same mixtures. For most of the cases except cellulose acetate membranes, the separations decreased as the methanol content decreased. Of the membranes tested,the cellulose acetate membranes also had the greatest separation factors for methanol.

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